

Allegations split Kearney alums

**But all agree
Heathwood
was popular**

By Steve Mills
Staff writer

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when boys and girls at Bishop Kearney High School were segregated, Brother John Laurence Heathwood offered them a rare bridge.

Not only did he convene boys and girls to the auditorium to perform in the musicals he produced and directed, but he was a teacher with whom students felt comfortable. Heathwood was involved in their lives, and he displayed a true affection for them.

"A lot of brothers and sisters, you just couldn't talk to them. They

kind of talked over your head," Mary Lou Zobel, who was at Bishop Kearney from 1967 to 1971, said yesterday. "But he talked right to you almost like you were an equal. He would be your friend if you needed one."

Last month, Nancy Maher, 40, a former Bishop Kearney student filed a lawsuit in state Supreme Court charging that Heathwood subjected her to nearly three decades of rape and other sexual abuse, as well as physical and psychological abuse.

Since the lawsuit made headlines a few days ago, former Bishop Kearney students and teachers have offered a sometimes conflicting portrait of Heathwood.

To some, he was that unique rare teacher whose enthusiasm for and dedication to his work and his students allowed him to overcome the distance that often exists between

teachers and their students, particularly at a more formal parochial school.

Others, though, now find his habit of putting his arm around them when he talked to them a breach of protocol, his fanny slap of a student going onstage in one of the school musicals less a show of encouragement than a sexual gesture.

What they all agree on, though, was that Heathwood, now in his sixties, was wildly popular.

"Sure, he'd put his arm around when he talked to you. But that's just how he was — very warm and

very emotional," said Ray Shahin, a faculty musical director.

"Brother Heathwood had people hanging around him like he was the Pied Piper of that school. He was just so popular. He really was in a class all by himself."

Heathwood, reached on Friday, said he was prohibited from discussing Maher's allegations by his superiors in the Congregation of Christian Brothers of Ireland.

Heathwood denied that he confessed to the charges to his superiors, something Maher's lawyer claimed, and he denied any wrongdoing with another former student, Barbara Zak.

Zak's allegations — that Heathwood tickled and spanked her — are less severe than those of Maher, who claimed that she lost the ability to conceive children because of sexual abuse and continues to suffer from a number of emotional problems.



Brother John
Heathwood

But Zak and Maher's allegations have provoked an argument among former students and teachers about Heathwood, one difficult to settle because of the two decades that have elapsed since Heathwood taught at Bishop Kearney. Most recently, he was assigned to a high school in Rhode Island.

"He was very involved with all the students," said John Nadig, who attended Bishop Kearney from 1967 to 1971 and had Heathwood in math and religion classes.

"The guy liked people."

The lawsuit has divided many who knew Heathwood and Maher. Nearly everyone agrees that they shared an enthusiasm for the drama club. Where they are at odds is over who is now telling the truth.

"Someone must be wrong about that relationship," said Shahin. "That's why it's such an American tragedy." □